

CANOLFAN A THEATR SOAR

SUMMARY

- Name of Organisation/ Parent Organisation: Canolfan a Menter Gymraeg Merthyr Tudful
- Start Date: 2007
- Number of Employees: 11 (3 F/T 8 P/T)
- Number of Volunteers: 20
- Structure: Charity and Company Limited by Guarantee
- Turnover: £279,000
- Website: www.theatrsoar.org.uk

PRODUCT/SERVICE

Canolfan Soar aims to promote the use of the Welsh language in Merthyr Tydfil and create new opportunities for people to socialise and participate in order to broaden horizons and increase confidence.

Canolfan Soar is home to Welsh language organisations in Merthyr and the location of Theatr Soar, Siop Llyfrau'r Enfys and Caffi Soar.

Housed within the converted Soar Chapel in Merthyr Tydfil, the theatre creates a central focal point to this community-owned venue, which prides itself on its inclusivity with the aim of encouraging the Welsh language to flourish and be a catalyst to enrich and improve the lives and prospects of local people. In addition to the theatre, the organisation runs a shop and café, and provides office space and meeting rooms for local groups to convene. They are home to many independent classes for drama groups, folk music, choir groups, art classes and local history groups.

HISTORY

The origins of the theatre began following the Urdd National Eisteddfod that was held at Cyfarthfa Castle in 1987. It became a catalyst for a group of local Welsh speakers to establish a centre for the Welsh language, that found a base within the vestry of Soar Chapel. The main focus was to offer monthly Welsh language events and a weekly youth club, with volunteers then using their own funds to establish a Welsh language book shop. Over those first 10 years from when it opened in 1991, sales from the book shop had generated £90,000 of income which was to prove vital in purchasing the chapel later.

In 1999, Lisbeth Mclean, (now director) became involved as a volunteer. Having been to university and started a family she had lost touch with her Welsh language

roots and became passionate about helping people to learn Welsh, and became qualified as a Welsh language tutor.

Lis's parents had both been involved in campaigning for a Welsh language school in Merthyr and fundraised to purchase a minibus to transport local children to the nearest Welsh school in Aberdare. The money was raised by putting on a fashion show and exhibition of Welsh tapestry and tweeds for which Lisbeth helped model. This helped to increase numbers of children from Merthyr accessing this Welsh language provision, from 6 to 36 children and led the way for the establishment of the Welsh school system.

Her experience of growing up in a family that was heavily involved in Welsh language and culture, and which took direct community action to help create the first Welsh speaking school in Merthyr, informed her own interest in the Welsh language as a vehicle for positive community development.

As her role as a volunteer grew, she then became a part-time employee and led in the development and growth of the organisation to what it is today. A significant change was for the centre to become a 'Menter Iaith' one of 22 across Wales, taking the approach of using the Welsh language as a means of community development, and encouraging its usage within a community context, through activities such as coffee mornings, concerts and events.

In 2003, the Welsh Language Board began to provide revenue funding to employ two staff members, including a youth officer. This led to lots of work around the arts and drama, and the centre developed drama workshops resulting at one point in a rock opera featuring 80 local children.

However, during this time, the building was beginning to fall into disrepair and urgently needed funding investment.

At the same time, the vestry had been earmarked for demolition to make way for a new car park. According to Lisbeth, this would have been likely to lead to the chapel itself, a listed building, falling into dereliction. The chapel leaders told the group, that if they could get the funding, they could purchase the whole site. Over a 10-year period, the book shop sales had amounted to £90,000 and it was this money that enabled the group to purchase the vestry and chapel in 2006, along with a development grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. This developed into a vision for a wider renovation of the chapel to incorporate a new theatre, and centre which would become the home for the Welsh language in Merthyr, resulting in a £1.4 million capital project plan. It took 6 years to raise the funds needed in a campaign led by Lisbeth - with a total of 13 different grants secured. Eventually the newly refurbished Canolfan Soar re-opened in 2011, bringing together all the Welsh language groups within the area under one roof, including the Meithrin, the Menter Iaith, Welsh café, Welsh bookshop and of course the theatre, with its 200 seating capacity.

ACHIEVEMENTS

The aim of the centre continues to be to raise the profile of the Welsh language in Merthyr and to strengthen its usage within the community through a natural process of integration. Rather than 'forcing' it upon people, Lisbeth says that the staff team very much take the ethos of welcoming people to take part, encouraging tolerance of different backgrounds and viewpoints. She feels that this bottom-up way of working has been very successful, with the centre taking root in the local community, creating a sense of mutual support.

Lisbeth very much believes in the power of the Welsh language to help tackle social poverty and deprivation and she has seen evidence of its ability to support community development, through improved health, wellbeing and confidence, linked to creating a sense of rich cultural heritage and identity.

The centre encourages inclusion and participation from non-Welsh speakers and many of the groups that use the building are English first language groups, such as the local choir, which began as a mental health referral scheme. This local choir is now a regular user of the centre and as a result they have now started to sing songs in the Welsh language. According to Lisbeth, this 'cross-fertilisation' factor is crucial in the success of the centre in broadening the take-up of Welsh language within the area.

With its spaces used at full capacity, the centre is Merthyr's largest theatre space, and has worked over the years to achieve a sustainable operation that has become well regarded throughout the county. New ventures continue to develop, with the most recent project including a £368,000 organ regeneration project, including its renovation and a three-year programme of arts and heritage activities to be run by a heritage officer. Additionally, they are involved in a project to create a Welsh theatre consortium, with two other venues (the Pavilion in Porthcawl and the Working Men's Institute in Ystradgynlais), working with 'Theatr Nanog' (a Welsh language theatre company).

In a recent social impact study commissioned by the centre, it was found to be contributing £1.3 million each year to the economy.

Now seen as a key contributor to community development in Merthyr, Lisbeth says that Canolfan Soar is recognised as a key stakeholder and is involved in many local partnerships. They are regularly consulted on planning and development initiatives for the wider authority and have formed excellent relationships with the local authority and local county voluntary council (CVC).

CHALLENGES

Lisbeth describes how difficult it was in the early days to undertake all the grant applications, business planning and documentation that was needed, with no previous experience.

Additionally, she says it was always difficult to make the case for a Welsh language centre - certainly at one point in time, Lis describes how Welsh language was seen as exclusive and would not be a priority for funders, making it a harder business case to make.

WHAT COULD BE DONE DIFFERENTLY?

Lisbeth feels that it would be good if there was more hands-on help from funders to help develop funding applications and this is something that seems to be less available than previously. She described how it could be particularly hard when individuals are members of the community who may have no experience of writing a funding application or plan and are doing it on a voluntary basis.

Lis comments on the reduction of community support over the last 10 years as services have been shrunk or lost. Lis says that without the support she received at the time from the CVC she could not have achieved what she did. The CVC particularly helped in terms of relationship building with the wider community and making helpful links which were critical to the success of the regeneration project.

In light of the diminished role and reduced capacity of CVCs and the loss of Communities First, she feels that support from funders is even more important and that creating more of a dialogue and support between applicant and funder would be welcomed. The reality is that people often don't know where to start and it can be hugely intimidating.

SUCCESS CRITERIA

Lisbeth feels that working with the community and listening to what they need and want is crucial and taking a bottom-up, not top-down approach is key to bringing people with you. She describes how consultation has always been a central part of all their work, ensuring that you know that what you are providing is needed and wanted.

Partnership working has been vital in the development of the centre, making connections with other groups and individuals in a flexible way has helped to build support networks and create a strong community base.

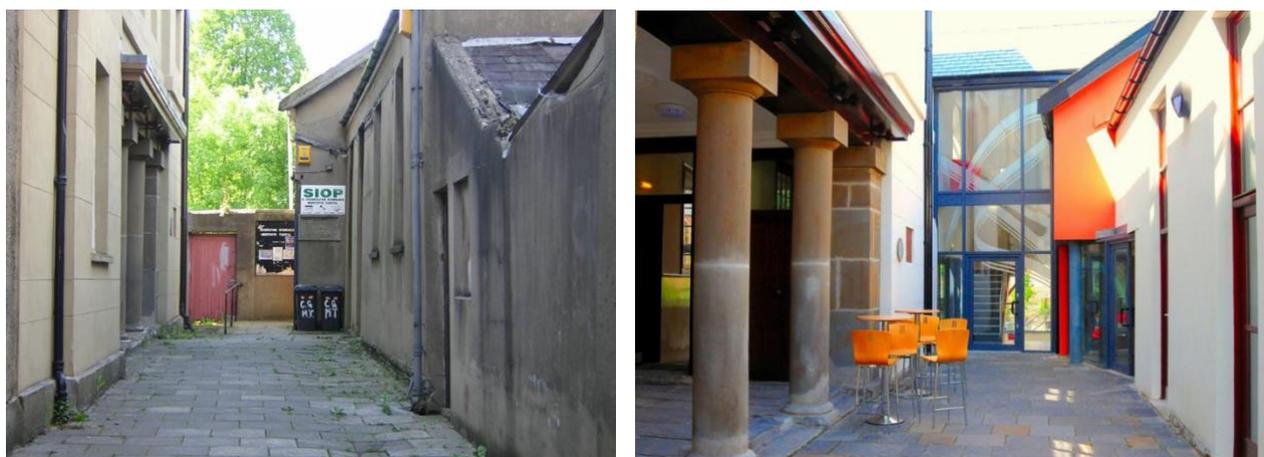
Lisbeth says that the commitment of staff and volunteers is a key part of the success, their passion for their work driving their ambition and involvement in the organisation which has become much more than 'just a job'. Volunteer management is a key skill

MAPPING COMMUNITY ASSETS IN WALES: CASE STUDY

needed and volunteers must be supported and nurtured by staff who are skilled and experienced. Volunteer management should not be underestimated. She describes how the theatre itself would not operate without its volunteers and that it runs on 'good will and fresh air'!

Being professional and taken seriously by other key players has also been crucial to the success of the centre, enabling them to have a 'seat at the table' in terms of wider county discussions. According to Lis, they are now seen as an organisation that is positively contributing to the area and have become part of wider strategic conversations.

'Places like Canolfan Soar are essential for the future of town centres. They create a vibrancy, and a more diverse evening economy. The centre also provides an excellent marketing opportunity for Merthyr as a town. It's a place to meet, to hold events and festivals and to help challenge perceptions of Merthyr.' Partner organisation



Canolfan Soar before and after its re-development